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Beyond Identity Fetishism: “Communal” Conflict in Ladakh and the Limits of Autonomy

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For more than a decade, the Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir has been the scene of large-scale violence. A plethora of groups combats the army and the paramilitary forces sent to quell the struggle for secession from India. Almost simultaneously with the eruption of armed struggle in the Kashmir Valley, a movement emerged in 1989 to “free Ladakh from Kashmir.” The movement, launched by an organization identifying itself initially as the Ladakh People’s Movement for Union Territory, demanded protection from alleged discriminatory policies by the Kashmir government that had been endured for decades. Union Territory status would bring the region under direct administration from New Delhi. In contrast to the continuing conflict in the valley, the agitation in Ladakh was characterized by relatively little violence, and although the demand for secession from Kashmir was rejected, the region was granted a measure of autonomy in May 1995 through the creation of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, Leh.¹

Ladakh, with an estimated population of 200,000 people, comprises an area of about 60,000 square kilometers in India’s northernmost state, Jammu and Kashmir.² Its two districts, named Kargil and Leh after their respective capitals, together officially cover 97,782 square kilometers, but large areas, mostly adjoining Leh District, are effectively under Chinese or Pakistani administration, although India maintains its claims.³ Within Ladakh as a whole, Buddhists form a slight majority. However, Leh District is overwhelmingly Buddhist (officially 81 percent in 1981), whereas Kargil District’s population is dominated by Shia Muslims (Census of India 1981:248–249).⁴ Its sparse population reflects the environmental characteristics of the area. Located beyond the reach of the monsoon, between Himalaya and Karakoram, Ladakh is a high-altitude desert with human settlements largely restricted to the valleys of the region’s main rivers: Shyok/Nubra, Zangskar—both tributaries—and Indus. Historically, the mainstay of local livelihoods has been subsistence agriculture and animal husbandry (mostly goats, sheep, cows, yak, and *dzomo* [crossbreds]),

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supplemented with regional (wool, meat, and salt for grain) and international transit trade (*pashmina* [cashmere] shawls, silk, carpets, tobacco, hashish) with Yarkand, Kashmir, Tibet, and the subcontinental plains.

In the popular media as well as in several scholarly analyses, the conflict in Ladakh—an independent kingdom until the invasion in 1834 by the army of Gulab Singh, the Dogra ruler of Jammu whose campaigns led to the creation of the State of Jammu and Kashmir in 1846—appears as a straightforward case: an oppressed (Buddhist) minority rises in resistance to a (Muslim) majority.⁵ In this reading, because Ladakh is characterized by unique conditions unlike anywhere else in the state or even India, and because the population has a unique identity, the devolution of power and decentralization of decision making are seen as the appropriate measures to ensure lasting peace, appropriate development, and social justice for the people of Ladakh. The dominant view on the identity of the state is expressed clearly in the report of the Gajendragadkar Commission of Inquiry (Government of Jammu and Kashmir 1968): “Although Jammu and Kashmir state has been a single political entity for over a hundred years, it cannot be denied that geographically, culturally and historically, it is composed of three separate homogeneous regions, namely Jammu, Kashmir, and Ladakh” (quoted in Lamb 1992:317). This case, then, suggests itself as an excellent example of how a democratic state that defines itself through “unity in diversity” can successfully accommodate demands for greater local participation without compromising the integrity of the nation-state.

Derived from British colonial administrative practice that designated certain regions as “Scheduled Districts,” which later were redesignated as “excluded areas,” the regional autonomous council formula is an elaboration of the practice of granting special status to “tribal” areas as established in the Indian Constitution, as Sonntag (1999) observes. The autonomous council model has been used with increasing frequency in India after its rediscovery in 1988. At that time, the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council was created to settle the violent insurrection by Nepali speakers led by the Gorkha National Liberation Front for a separate state of Gorkhaland to be carved out of the State of West Bengal (Hutt 1997; Subba 1992). The formula has been used with varying success also in Assam, Mizoram, Jharkhand, and Ladakh, usually in cases in which movements were not seeking outright secession.⁶ In connection with the insurrection in Kashmir, a solution through some form of enhanced autonomy for the state and its constituent parts is being contemplated.

In a recent study, Lapidoth writes that “autonomy is a means for diffusion of powers in order to preserve the unity of a state while respecting the diversity of its population” (1997:3). Drawing on extensive research in the Ladakh region, I will offer a critical analysis of the conception of diversity that forms the basis for the autonomy solution. This conception, which relies on the relative stability and irreducibility of minority groups, is rooted in the same understanding of culture and identity as the “old” nationalisms, whose primordialism and essentialism have long been the target of critiques by social scientists.⁷ Those critiques, however, have failed to dislodge in political and everyday

practice the hegemonic discourse of identity, the "universal code of particularity" (Billig 1995:72–73) that serves to underwrite the states system and conceptions of collective human rights. The contemporary prevalence of the politics of identity is not a sign of a new awakening of nations, this time in the guise of ethnicity. Rather, it is the product of two interrelated world historical processes: (perceived) dislocations because of the spread and deepening of capitalist relations and the increasing reliance of practices of representation and democracy—in turn rooted in a distributive conception of justice (Young 1990)—on the imputed stability and irreducibility of identity and the groupness it supposedly reflects.

I suggest that identity discourse is rooted in and (re)produces *identity fetishism*, in which the identification of the "right" social group/culture/community and its empowerment supposedly offers the greatest guarantees of peace and prosperity for all. In Marx's classical formulation, fetishization signifies that "the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race" (1976:165). Just as the fetishism of commodities creates an illusion of objectivity and commensurability of relations between things, obscuring their fundamentally social origin and character, the fetishism of identities posits an *identity of identities* (Billig 1995), whether conceived as culture, race, community, or whatever, as the natural, essential properties of groups.⁸ The reference to identity—not necessarily any specific one—has that "familiarity which persuades us that our cultural form is not historical, not social, not human, but natural—'thing-like' and physical" (Taussig 1980:3). This notion of identities, then, as identities are used, appealed to, displayed, signaled, contested, and claimed, is a product of modernity, itself inextricably connected with the rise, spread, and deepening of capitalism and the international states system.⁹

Roseberry (1996:71) situates the emergence of the discourse of ethnicity and other forms of community as "languages of community and contestation" in a context of state projects and hegemonic processes. A similar emphasis on discursive frames and language is also present in the analysis of the social production of indifference and the poetics of nationhood offered by Herzfeld (1992, 1996). Herzfeld (1996:141) suggests that we should understand nationhood as an elaborate metaphor and the entirety of social interaction as rhetoric. Identities, then, are metaphors without stable referents, stereotyped images of fluid and multiple practices of social identification. As Comaroff puts it, "Identities are not things but relations" (1996:165). "Identities" are supposedly congruent with the social relations they indicate, but instead they reify a limited set of those relations, and their metaphorical character is forgotten (Herzfeld 1992). Instead of social relations expressed in practices of identification, "identities" become properties of individuals and collectivities, and they gradually become detached even from these, taking on a life of their own, coming to be seen as possessing agency in their own right. "Identity" finally becomes that "force" that explains rather than what needs to be explained (Handler 1994).¹⁰

In India, the “identity” most commonly thought to drive violent conflict is religion. In the South Asian context, “communalism” refers to religious community partisanship and is widely viewed as one of the main threats to the Indian republic, which defines itself as secular and marked by unity in diversity. At the same time, it is commonly regarded as a central, sometimes even a “natural” element in Indian society and politics. This latter notion is connected with the colonial genealogy of the concept that saw religious identity as one of the essential defining characteristics of Indian society (Chatterjee 1993; Inden 1990; Kaviraj 1992; Pandey 1990). Such imaginings of Indian society shaped colonial perceptions and governmentality, and this in turn contributed to the concept’s ongoing realization. The violent partition of the subcontinent on the basis of religious communities inscribed communalism onto the geographical body of the postcolonial state, while the constitution of the republic enshrined principles of secularism to exorcize the demon. More recently, the rise of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in December 1992 have triggered fierce debates about the place of religion in modern Indian politics.¹¹ In Ladakh there is a widespread conviction that, despite the rhetoric to the contrary, the political system in India and particularly the administration in Kashmir are fundamentally communalist. Consequently, communalist strategies have become an important element in Ladakhi political practice.

One purpose of this article, then, is to contribute to the development of a theoretical approach that can help in recognizing and understanding, rather than domesticating, the complexity and fluidity of social life. An ethnographically rich account of social identification and political practice in Ladakh may contribute to softening some of the exclusivist conceptions of community and identity that characterize political discourse in the region today. However, it does not in itself address the immediate questions that political activists in Ladakh raise: how to conceive and achieve a form of governance that is more responsive to the diversity of local needs and demands. Identity fetishism is not only a theoretical problem but, rather, a dominant feature of everyday public and political discourse, in which “identities” are treated “as both *natural characteristics* and *the collective basis of interest groups*” (Greenhouse and Greenwood 1998:1). Because mainstream political scientists and policy makers as well as dominant pluralist and multiculturalist approaches to democratic theory rely on the supposed irreducibility of “community”—although understandings of its basis vary—it is necessary *also* to engage these normative theories and practices to identify possible avenues of rethinking democratic theory and practice in ways more in correspondence with lived practice and experience. My purpose is not to posit a pure field of social life beyond politics but, rather, to suggest the need for a space for other practices of identification and other kinds of social relations that do not conform to the exclusivist idioms of the discourse of identity politics. This article, therefore, also will address some of the normative questions raised by my theoretical argument and ethnography.¹²

In cases of "ethnic" conflict, I argue, identity fetishism leads to a "misrecognition" of social identification, obscures the processes and conditions that give rise to conflict, and reproduces the logic of discrimination that it seeks to resolve. I suggest that democracy and justice may be approximated more successfully precisely through allowing fluid and contingent articulations of identity/difference and, indeed, the possibility of *not* identifying in any singular prescribed way, rather than through reformulations of representative democracy, including visions of multicultural pluralism.

Communities, Cultures, Identities

We are living in an "era of groupism," writes Immanuel Wallerstein (1995:6). The politics of our time is dominated by "defensive groups, each of which *asserts* an identity around which it builds solidarity and struggles to survive alongside and against other such groups" (Wallerstein 1995:6). Indeed, rather than a Pax Americana as proclaimed in 1989 by George Bush, the contemporary period appears to be one of a "new world disorder" (Anderson 1992) characterized by a proliferation of ostensibly "ethnic" conflict. Diagnoses of this eruption of conflicts in hitherto apparently stable states range from deepening polarization to the resurgence of "ancient hatreds" because of "failing" or "weak" states. Some see a fundamental crisis of the nation-state brought on by globalizing forces that integrate social, political, and economic life at a global level but at the same time cause disintegration of previously embedded forms of socioeconomic and political organization (Gill and Law 1993; Held 1991). Others warn that rumors of the death of the nation-state are premature, pointing to its continued political, economic, and ideological salience (Anderson 1993; Held 1995; Mann 1996; McMichael 1996).¹³ In general, though, there is agreement that the current world historical moment raises important questions about the states system and citizenship, democracy, and governance and poses a series of challenges to conceptions of social justice.

I largely agree with this interpretation of the contemporary period as one of profound changes in the global political economy, although the causes, character, and implications of the crisis or crises require specification. Global flows of people, commodities, and ideas may have increased in volume and velocity, but the idea that this constitutes a "new kind of uncertainty in social life," as Appadurai (1998:228) suggests following Zygmunt Bauman, strikes me as relying on precisely that "Weberian" notion of "highly regimented bureaucratic-legal orders, governed by the growth of procedure and predictability," that it seeks to challenge. In my assessment, what is melting into air, to recall the famous dictum, is the possibility of *imagining* stability rather than essentially "fixed, fast-frozen relations," including "ethnicities." The anxiety involved in the realization of this impossibility of a correspondence between semantic and bureaucratic purity and social practice is a product of the insistence on order, not of the fact of diversity and ambiguity per se (Anderson 1998). The negotiation of "real" social difference and uncertainty always has been part of the dynamic of culture—indeed, it constitutes its very fabric.

Although it is evident that these various changes trigger, invite, and enable responses in the form of group claims, demands, and justifications, it is necessary to scrutinize the “groupness” of the groups that are represented and said to demand. In recent years the historical and social contingency of specific “identities” is generally acknowledged, but although most accept that communities are necessarily imagined, the contingency and fluidity of the social *groups* that “identities” are supposed to reflect are less commonly problematized. Consequently, the rhetoric of a conflict between “groups” is often taken at face value, and the principle of representation of those groups as the key to justice and peace is rarely questioned.

Paradoxically, it is the normalization, indeed hegemony, of the very representation of the world as comprising discrete collectivities of groups with shared identities (different from group to group but identical in their groupness)—a homogenization and objectification made possible through the convergence of scientific and bureaucratic conceptions of a (rationally) ordered world—that produces and indeed organizes the social *as* a world of discrete collectivities.¹⁴ Two fundamental intellectual operations characterize the scientific project: classification and hierarchical ordering. Both are “operations of naturalization par excellence or, more accurately, of projection of historical and social differences into the realm of an imaginary nature” (Balibar 1991:56).¹⁵ A convergence of natural and rational order is presumed to exist, and this conceptual collapsing allows the construction of classifications (and consequently of hierarchies) and an overarching grammar of classifications and identifications that are almost incontestable, constituting an almost hermetic frame.¹⁶ The organization and imagining of the world as a world of peoples, cultures, and nations create that world, those peoples, cultures, and nations, through the institutionalization of formal systems of representations—although this process is never complete and fully determining the social but, rather, always contingent and contested. It is not that differentiations through collective identifications do not exist as social practices, but their *meaning* is fundamentally altered through objectification and institutionalization.¹⁷ The identification as people, nation, or culture becomes *necessary* because the states system, (international) law, and the distributive and other political practices of (nation-)states do not recognize, quite literally, the fluidity and multiplicity of identifications or grant other forms of collective identification and mobilization the same *inherent* moral and legal justification and *grandeur* that peopleness and so on possess.¹⁸ Hence, in many approaches to the understanding of collective movements as identity based, what matters are those very identities, whose natural, inherent value is not questioned. As a result, social scientific and public debates generally operate within an identity-based discursive frame, and identity—whether labeled nation, race, ethnicity, tribe, or whatever—is perhaps the *only* recognizable and legitimate claim to be made in struggles with states or for states.

My work on the struggle for regional autonomy in Ladakh seeks to show how events there cannot be reduced to a collective resistance on the basis of identity/difference in an explicit critique of the larger existing hegemonic

“order” and certainly cannot be read without recognizing the different positionings of actors in webs of power relations within Ladakh. What the Ladakhi case shows is not only the inadequacy of “primordialist” approaches but also that the tendency in much subaltern, postcolonial, and poststructuralist scholarship to celebrate (some) resistances as expressions of collective identifications—as resistance of groups (of women, tribals, subalterns)—fails to recognize, indeed silences, the contradictory and problematic composition of those groups and, indeed, their very constitution in the first place.¹⁹ Illustrative is Partha Chatterjee’s (1993) discussion of the fragments of the Indian nation, which are treated as internally coherent (they are whole fragments) and as unproblematically and undoubtedly Indian. Although he may be seeking to recover a more diverse account of Indian nationalism, he effectively silences and erases differences among and across the constituent elements of the Indian nation. Rather than liberating, his analysis threatens to oppress, forcing those he identifies as “fragments” into a singular frame rooted in a specific (Bengali?) imagining of Indianness. While studies such as this celebrate the fragment, they celebrate it *as* a fragment, leaving it unproblematized; the analysis is left firmly rooted in identity fetishism. Similarly, the granting of autonomy and the institutionalization of communal and tribal “identities” as the basis of representation and participation, a central feature of the Indian political system, are seen as constituting appropriate recognition of local “identities” and practices of belonging. Yet, as I intend to show, this “solution” to the conflict does not address its underlying causes and in effect fosters and rewards the kind of communal antagonisms that it is supposed to defuse and resolve.

Identifying Ladakh

Identity fetishism has led to stereotyped, simplistic readings of society and culture in Ladakh.²⁰ As part of the “princely state” of Jammu and Kashmir, strategically located at the northern frontiers of British India, Ladakh was surveyed extensively in the course of the 19th century, its population, geography, economy, religions, and legal practices enumerated, classified, and codified. By the turn of the century, reference books such as the *Gazetteer* (1974, originally published in 1890) were available, which provided administrators and academics with quickly accessible, basic “data”; the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India and Boundary Commissions had fixed the borders and produced maps; land settlements had provided an unambiguous attribution of ownership of the land; and census and protoethnographic texts had identified the different sections of the population.²¹ Largely informed by shifting “tastes” in the British imagining of India, which was shaped in part by Indian (nationalist) imaginings, the foundational categories were race, caste, tribe, and religion. With the spread of “communalist” politics—itself a product of the institutionalization of a specific, religious identity fetishist imagining and administration of Indian society and politics—and the declining acceptance of racist ideologies, the concept of religious “community” came to serve as the organizing principle for the census and for political reforms in Kashmir.

Ladakhis had played a minor role in the early mappings, albeit a crucial one as guides, caravaners, and suppliers of information, food, and labor.²² Because of the alleged mishandling of relief efforts by the administration in response to a famine in the Kashmir Valley and the general deterioration of the “law and order situation” in the state around the turn of the century, British involvement in the affairs of nominally self-governing Jammu and Kashmir increased. In 1931, a Commission of Enquiry was appointed to look into the “grievances and complaints” of the different communities of the state which were understood to have led to the clashes of the summer of 1931, when protests by Muslim demonstrators against the Hindu maharaja’s rule were violently suppressed by the police. The brief of the Glancy Commission, named after its chairman, explicitly stated that it was to solicit representations on behalf of the different “communities” of the state: representatives of the Muslims and Hindus from both the Kashmir and the Jammu regions (Government of Jammu and Kashmir 1932a). The communalization of popular resentment at social and economic inequities—expressed, for example, in the labor conflict in 1924 in the State Silk Factory over low wages or the resistance to forced labor (*begar*) in Baltistan (MacDonald 1998)—had been informed in Jammu and Kashmir, as elsewhere in India, by the establishment of reformist organizations such as the Dogra Sabha for Hindus in Jammu (formed in 1903), the Anjuman-i-Nusrat-ul-Islam (established in 1905) in Srinagar (Lamb 1992), and the Yuvak Sabha for the Hindu (“pandit”) community in the valley (established in 1915).²³ Until then, however, no such development appears to have taken place in the Ladakh region. The Glancy Commission recommended the formation of a partly elected assembly, the Praja Sabha, with separate electorates for the different communities (Government of Jammu and Kashmir 1932b, 1934).²⁴ The Ladakh *wazarat* (province) was allotted two seats reserved for Buddhists for Leh *tehsil* (an administrative unit below the *wazarat* level) and a seat for one Muslim each for Kargil and Skardu *tehsil*. These seats were filled by nominees, for elections were not deemed feasible because of the remoteness and inaccessibility of the area. The commission thus not only invited but also institutionalized representation on the basis of religious community, and constitutional reform tied electoral democracy to the same imputed essences of Kashmiri and Ladakhi “identity.”

It was in this context that Ladakhi politics became formally communalized. A small group of neo-Buddhist Kashmiri pandits (Hindus) in Srinagar formed the Kashmir-Raj Bodhi Maha Sabha (KRBMS) expressly to create a “representative” organization of the Buddhists of Kashmir that could demand a voice at the Glancy Commission’s proceedings. A letter of authorization from Stagtsang Raspa, the abbot of Hemis, Ladakh’s most powerful monastery, served to convince a hesitant commission to allow a representation to be submitted, although a young student based in Srinagar at the time, Sonam Norbu, was the only Ladakhi present at the occasion.²⁵ The memorandum detailed the backwardness of the region’s Buddhists, emphasizing the need for educational development and eradication of social evils such as the consumption of alcohol

(Representatives of Kashmir’s Buddhists 1932). Besides addressing “developmental” issues, the KRBMS and the Ladakhi Young Men’s Buddhist Association (YMBA), whose formation it inspired, raised the specter of Muslim progeny outnumbering Buddhists in the region and warned against the political consequences such a shift in ratios would have in a system in which representation is based on numbers. Several causes of the stagnation of the Buddhist population were identified. Minutes from early YMBA meetings illustrate those concerns and their connection with poverty, primogeniture, lack of education, and assorted “social evils” such as the consumption of *chang*, the local beer and staple of the diet.²⁶ It was with a view to ensuring competitive growth of the Buddhist “community” that the organizations demanded a ban on polyandry and a reform of inheritance laws to stop the practice of primogeniture. It is said that the proposal for the law banning polyandrous marriages was drafted by Gobind Lal Shah, a politically active Kashmiri pandit serving as headmaster of Leh Middle School, and was submitted to the maharaja by the first president of the YMBA and member of the Praja Sabha, Ladakh’s King (*Gyalpo*) Jigmed Namgyal. A law banning polyandry was passed in 1941 and was followed in 1943 by a “Ladakh Succession to Property Act,” which banned primogeniture.²⁷

Although official classifications invariably reflected the existence of the sizable Muslim population of the region, academic interest and popular imagination—fed by hugely popular travelers’ accounts—focused on the Buddhists. With Tibet off-limits to Europeans, Ladakh came to be regarded as a more or less sufficient substitute for the “real thing.” Here, it was believed, a pristine example of Himalayan Buddhist culture could be studied. The myth of Shangri-la, which suggests a society of spiritually evolved, peaceful beings, shaped research questions as well as popular representations of Ladakh.²⁸ From this perspective—embraced by many Ladakhis as well as sympathizers and some scholars today to emphasize Ladakh’s unique identity and value to humanity—the ban on polyandry is now seen as an example of the ill consequences of foreign rule: a check on population growth has been removed because of outsiders meddling with Ladakh’s ecologically sound culture. That the ban was a Buddhist initiative is largely forgotten.

Development: Promises, Projects, and Practice

After partition and the tumultuous accession of the truncated state to the Indian union, Ladakh’s emergent, modern, educated elite, many of whom had been inspired and often sponsored by KRBMS leaders such as Shridhar Kaul, continued to demand greater attention to the development of the region. The dominant political party in Jammu and Kashmir at the time, the Kashmir National Conference, was represented in Leh by the highest ranking representative of the Gelug sect of Buddhism, Kushok Bakula Rinpoche, and his staunch supporter Sonam Wangyal.²⁹ Land reforms introduced by the state government of Sheikh Abdullah in 1950 had little effect in Ladakh, for most monastic lands were exempted at the request of YMBA and the newly established All-Ladakh Gonpa Association (Kaul and Kaul 1992:188 ff.; Shakspe

1988). The reform, like most policies introduced by Sheikh Abdullah's government, was designed with a view to addressing the situation in the Kashmir Valley, where a numerically small elite held a considerable percentage of the land. In Ladakh, however, with the exception of the monasteries and some noble family properties, landholdings were small, well below the ceiling of 182 *kanal* (approximately 23 acres) set by the act (Grist 1998:61). And because many aristocratic families divided their lands among their relatives and progeny, they managed to escape the effects of the reform, although there were exceptions: The king of Zangla in Zangskar lost 90 percent of his land (Riaboff 1997:238). According to Rigzin Namgyal Kalon (1995), head of one of the most important noble families in central Ladakh, only ten families or so were affected by the act. In 1953, the Wazir Commission of Inquiry visited Ladakh and reported that there appeared to be no popular support for reduction of the monastic landholdings (Ganhar and Ganhar 1956:196; Shaksपो 1988). And in 1972, when another attempt at reducing monastic landholdings was contemplated, public opposition voiced through the All-Ladakh Gonpa Association again stopped the government from implementing legislation. The association submitted a number of memoranda to the Agrarian Reforms Act Commission and Chief Minister Mir Qasim that argued that, because the estates support the collectivity of monks and nuns rather than private interests, they do not fall under the purvey of the act: "We may close representation by making an explicit mention to the fact that Gompas of Ladakh are never a reactionary force against the progressive policies of the Government."³⁰ Consequently, monastic establishments continue to be the largest landholders in Ladakh (see Gutschow 1998; Paljor Tsarong 1987; Tsering Shakya et al. 1994). Hemis monastery, historically the most powerful and richest of Ladakh's monastic establishments, owns about 2,000 acres of land, whereas most of the other major monasteries own between 200 and 500 acres of arable land (Singh 1977).³¹ These days, however, their wealth derives as much from real estate property in prime locations in the booming bazaar of Leh town and from enterprises as diverse as trucking and tourism, supplemented increasingly by funds from foreign Buddhist organizations and individuals in Asia and the West.

A second major initiative shortly after independence, the settlement and in some cases cancellation of debts, led to considerable improvement in the living conditions of common Ladakhi farmers. Many households had historically been heavily indebted to landlords and moneylenders. Most commonly, farmers became indebted because they were unable to raise the interest to repay in kind the grain borrowed for sowing at the start of the season. According to Kalon Rigzin Namgyal, debts rarely were collected forcibly and could be settled through symbolic payments. According to him, if one owed 100 *khal* (of grain; one *khal* equals about ten kilograms)³² and could not repay, one could give a rope and the debt would be cancelled. For 1,000 *khal*, one would have to pay one goat skin, and for 2,000, one bull (Rigzin Namgyal 1995). Other older people insist, however, that indebtedness was indeed a serious problem. As Gutschow (1998:108) points out in her discussion of the Zangskar region—

which was rather poorer and not in all respects comparable to central Ladakh—the difficult situation of farmers was exacerbated by high rents on monastic lands and the prevalence of sharecropping where subsistence on the small share of the produce could pose serious problems. There are indications that subsistence may have been less precarious in central Ladakh, where, according to the Wazir Commission's report (quoted in Ganhar and Ganhar 1956:196), one-quarter of the crop would usually be payable in rent to monastic landowners. According to Riaboff (1997:265), in Zangla in Zangskar the tax is on average one-third of the crop. The imposition of new taxes by the Dogras on top of preexisting obligations in labor and produce to aristocracy and monasteries had aggravated the situation for many households during the first half of the 19th century, and tax reforms introduced by the administration had provided only limited relief. Some early reforms had been initiated by British subject W. H. Johnson, who served the maharaja as *wazir* (governor) of the Ladakh Wazarat from 1871 to 1882 (Francke 1992:147). Contemporary letters and historiography suggest that he enjoyed considerable popularity among sections of the population.³³ One such letter to the maharaja from September 1879, written on behalf of "all the people of Ladakh," pleads for Johnson not to be transferred or else to be replaced by "just as kind and wise an officer." The appeal seems to have worked initially, but resistance from among the landed and monastic elite continued to grow, and ultimately he was transferred to Jammu (see also Chohan 1984:200). In a report, Johnson is explicit about what he deems to be the cause of his troubles:

I obtained the sanction of HH to increase the land rents all through Ladakh by 25 percent, giving tax cultivators the option of a more satisfactory settlement than at present exists, of their lands by means of a cadastral survey—without hesitation the preference was given to the increase of 25 percent, and annual payment of a further sum of Rupees 7000 was agreed to: but in the meantime the Lamas, who are by far the most interested party, in as much, in addition to the Gonpa lands which they hold in La Kar [Lang Kar? original illegible], they possess and cultivate quite as much again which is not even shown in the old settlement records—commenced to be troubled about themselves, and looking on the 25 percent increase as but the thin edge of the wedge, and fearing that the cadastral survey would be sure to follow when the lands surreptitiously held by them must be discovered, they induced the people to withdraw the assent they had given. [1880: sec. 3]

According to local lore, however, it was also Johnson's personal behavior that triggered his dismissal from Leh. Moravian missionary A. H. Francke (1992:142) discretely refers to "a few faults," which according to my sources included Johnson's fondness for young local women. Whatever the case may have been, Johnson's troubles illustrate the powerful position of the monasteries and the nobility as well as their resistance to attempts to reduce their privileges.³⁴

The collapse of trade with Central Asia and Tibet in the first half of the 20th century, caused by the closing of the borders by the Chinese occupation of eastern Turkestan and Tibet, meant economic disaster for the trading families of Leh, mostly Sunni Muslims, and contributed further to a general reorientation

of Ladakh toward New Delhi. Although long-distance trade was important for Ladakh's regional and indeed global political and economic standing, its local economic importance should not be exaggerated. Leh was no more than an entrepôt on the trade routes between the subcontinent and Central Asia, albeit a prominent one (Rizvi 1999). Only a small number of local families had direct interests in international trade, although both obligations to provide portage and fodder to official travelers and the availability of limited employment opportunities affected villagers' lives along the main routes. Intraregional trade did form an important element in local livelihoods, linking pastoral and agricultural economies (Ahmed 1996; Rizvi 1985, 1999). By the early 20th century, tourism and "sports"-related travel became an increasingly important source of income and of some distress for local villagers.³⁵

Discontent

The rupture of Ladakh's religious, cultural, and economic links with Tibet, Central Asia, and Baltistan and Ladakh's incorporation into the Indian Union, bringing with it new standards of modernity and development, were factors contributing to the marginalization of Ladakh, as well as to a perception of this by Ladakh's elites, regardless of community. Gradually, Ladakhi leaders, Muslim as well as Buddhist, came to see themselves as discriminated against by the state government. As early as 1952, in a famous speech delivered during the discussion of the budget in the State Assembly, the Ladakhi representative, Kushok Bakula Rinpoche, alleged that the state government was purposely neglecting the region:

If you look at this budget estimate from end to end, you will not find even a single mention of Ladakh. . . . The government seems to have decided not to spend even a single *paisa* in this area. . . . At the present moment, the world is moving towards a delicate situation, when independence and self-determination is being promoted all over and these ideas have found a place in people's thinking and aspirations. When the New Kashmir and the New China are also looking towards this new dream, they are feeling it and they are trying to put these ideas into practice. To expect that the people of Ladakh can remain unaffected and unaware of these global and regional movements and will continue to act and present themselves as deaf and dumb and without expectations, is unreasonable. The world has awoken fully and each identity is expressing itself. Why is there an expectation that people in Ladakh will continue to snore along and will not wake up? When for other people self-expression and aspirations for progress are considered virtues, why is it that the same does not hold true for Ladakhis, and that when they try to express their needs and desires a doubtful eye is cast on them?³⁶

The demand for secession from Kashmir and direct association with India would be heard again and again, as would be the accusation of discrimination by the Jammu and Kashmir state government. Several investigations into this allegation have been carried out. For example, the Gajendragadkar Commission of Inquiry—constituted to investigate regional imbalances within Jammu and Kashmir state—gave a report comparing the relative share of Ladakh in

the total plan allocations in the state (Government of Jammu and Kashmir 1968:24–25). Its figures show that although the total expenditure on development in the state in the first five-year plan (1951–55) was more than 115 million rupees, Leh was allocated no plan funds. In the second plan, Leh was granted Rs. 8.5 million out of a total state expenditure of Rs. 312 million. By the third plan (1961–65), the total budget for development in the state had risen to Rs. 640 million, out of which Leh was allotted less than 15 million. If one includes nonplan allocations of close to Rs. 95 million during the third plan, actual per capita expenditure in Ladakh was Rs. 1,154, whereas in the rest of Jammu and Kashmir it was only Rs. 196. On a per square mile basis, however, Jammu and Kashmir was given Rs. 13,809 while Leh received a mere Rs. 2,905. Ladakhi demands, then as now, consequently always refer to the large size of the area to counter the argument that per-capita government spending in Ladakh is among the highest in India.

It is important to recognize that in the 1950s and 1960s, and arguably even today, only a small fraction of Ladakh's population would have had much experience of the alleged discrimination by the state government. Because most Ladakhis continued to be largely self-sufficient subsistence farmers and herders, who could increasingly supplement their incomes through the sale of labor and agricultural products to the growing number of military and administrative personnel posted in the state, discrimination in terms of access to education, higher ranking jobs, and the awarding of contracts—to name a few of the main complaints—was not something that affected their lives directly. In fact, for strategic reasons, infrastructural development was given high priority, and the construction of roads and bridges improved mobility within the region. The military and civilian authorities promoted the introduction of new crops, fertilizers, and pesticides in agriculture to reduce dependence on food imports from the plains. Much of the surplus was purchased by the army, which has personnel stationed in Ladakh in numbers said to equal or exceed the local population. Especially in the border areas of Changthang, Nubra, and Rupshu, local livelihoods are heavily dependent on the presence of the army. The withdrawal of a significant contingent of troops from Changthang, when relations with China improved in the early 1990s, caused severe economic problems in that vulnerable region.³⁷ Government and army interventions generally have been regarded as positive among the rural population, a point readily conceded by one of the leaders of the agitation for Union Territory status: "Villagers were unbothered. They always gave credit to the *sarkar* [government] for every little thing," he explained. Consequently, popular mobilization in the rural areas could not be taken for granted by local activists, and tours of the villages to educate the people were an important part of the preparations for agitation.

The situation has been markedly different in the relatively urbanized areas of Leh and Kargil, especially among the entrepreneurial elites and the educated youth. Local campaigns starting in the 1950s involving religious and political leaders and songs and plays to promote modern education have led to a sharp increase in the number of educated but un- or underemployed youths, especially

men. Government jobs are limited, as are entrepreneurial opportunities, for example, through contracting or tourism-related enterprises, both sectors being firmly in the hands of established businesses. The young men of the region frequently are not only unwilling but also unable to go back to farming or herding. They have spent their early years at school rather than on the farm, and any kind of higher education meant—and means—having to spend years in the plains or the valley. At the same time, the quality of public education in Ladakh itself is so poor that routinely more than 90 percent of students fail the matriculation exam that gives access to higher studies (Sonam Wangchuk 1995). Those with family connections or in business rather than “service,” especially contractors and tourism operators, also rely on government projects and spending. The former complain about corruption and nepotism, while the latter deplore the absence of “proper facilities” that would attract more and wealthier foreign tourists. Lack of improvement in these areas is seen as evidence of government neglect. On the one hand, then, there is a growing pool of poorly educated village youths—increasingly drifting to the city in search of jobs—and a small, well-educated, and politically active group of urban young men, some from well-to-do families, who demand employment and business opportunities. On the other hand, there are established entrepreneurs, often from noble (*skudrag*) families, who wish to expand their businesses—for example, in tourism—through expansion of facilities such as roads, hotels, and the energy supply. It was among these groups, especially the un- or underemployed urban youth, that the agitation for regional autonomy found its most fervent supporters.

With the increasing dependence on wage incomes and government interventions, mutual aid networks in the villages have begun to break down. This is illustrated by disputes such as that which erupted in 1998 in a village near Leh, where the traditional taxpaying houses (known as *khangpa*) put their relatives in “subsidiary houses” or *khangu* under a social boycott—banning all interaction on pain of fines and other sanctions—to force them to take a share of the *khangpa* obligations toward the local monastery, such as labor and sponsorship of religious rituals. As one villager explained to me, if people could just give money, there would have been no problem, but no one is willing to offer time and effort.³⁸ Throughout Ladakh, labor-sharing arrangements among households, such as taking care of each other’s animals on a rotational basis (a practice called *res*), sharing of farm tools and animals, and collaboration during the harvest, are being undermined by monetization as well as the unavailability of children during school hours.³⁹ Off-farm employment, and especially seasonal labor in the city in tourism or construction, is adding to the shortage of labor at home and means increasing dependence on imported foods, available through the Public Distribution System and the market, which in turn further undermines the value of local staple crops, especially barley, which is gradually pushed out by imported rice and wheat (Grist 1998:147). Dependence on these subsidized “essential commodities” is most pronounced in the urban areas. Official figures, which do not take account of the considerable private

market trade, show that imports of rice and wheat almost tripled in the period 1989–98 (Sonam Dawa 1999:371). Any breakdown of supplies, trucked across the Himalayas during the brief summer, any increase in price, is blamed on the government. Today, the blame is placed on the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC), which came into being in September 1995. Ironically, because of the late opening and early closure of the roads in the preceding summer, there were severe shortages of certain commodities in the spring of 1996. Demonstrations were held accusing the Hill Council of incompetence. Yet not only did the problem originate before the LAHDC was created, but “essential commodities” is one of the areas over which it has no jurisdiction at all.⁴⁰

Whereas during the first decades after independence the demands voiced by Ladakhi representatives could be dismissed as largely the concern of a small urban elite, in the past 20 years the number of people who stand to gain or believe they will gain from increased spending, improved infrastructure, and other development benefits has increased, and such persons are no longer found only in the urban areas. The question for Ladakh’s disgruntled leaders was how their demands could be raised in such a manner that the central government would support them in their struggle against the state government.

The Importance of Being Tribal and Communal

The two most important discourses available to Ladakhis to represent and justify their demand for special treatment (or, in their understanding, equal treatment) were the officially legitimate Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST) system of “affirmative action” and the officially illegitimate discourse of communalism. In the case of the former, formal criteria of “tribality” needed to be met, which proved difficult because these criteria had been based on British and nationalist readings of *adivasi* communities, which were supposed to be characterized by the absence of written languages and animist and other “primitive” forms of religion. Tribes, by definition, were at an earlier, lower stage of development than the world’s civilizations. Ladakh, with its rich Buddhist and Islamic religious traditions and well-developed arts, hardly fit those notions. Indeed, it is said that when an offer of ST status for Ladakhis was made to Kushok Bakula Rinpoche shortly after independence, he declined the offer—according to some contemporaries because he felt that it would imply a degrading status for the population of the region. By the late 1960s, when he was serving as a member of parliament for Ladakh, Bakula Rinpoche was fervently pleading for the recognition of the Buddhists of Ladakh as “backward classes.” Following the recommendations of the Gajendragadkar Committee, a Backward Classes Committee headed by J. N. Wazir was created in February 1969, but this rejected Bakula Rinpoche’s suggestion, arguing that only certain backward areas of Jammu and Kashmir required such special privileges, not entire “communities” (Kak 1978:107; Puri 1983).⁴¹ Especially after the central government’s Mandal Commission in 1980 suggested the creation of reservation quotas of 27 percent in education and government

jobs for members of what were officially called “Other Backward Classes,” at a time when development and education were beginning to have a noticeable impact in the region, demands for recognition of *Ladakhis* as an ST were repeatedly put forward to the government.⁴² Despite early promises by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, it was not until 1986 that a team of social scientists was sent to Ladakh to determine which tribes existed and which deserved to be included on the ST list. Finally, in October 1989, after a summer marked by violent clashes between agitators demanding autonomy and security forces, eight distinct tribes—none of which is called “Ladakhi”—were recognized, comprising about 89 percent of the population of the Ladakh region (van Beek 1997b). The strategic adoption of the demand for backward/ST status, starting as early as 1969 but increasingly as a focal demand, reflects the ways in which Ladakhi political leaders creatively adapted to the exigencies and possibilities of Indian political discourse of the day. Just as the representation of the region by bureaucrats, scientists, and politicians changed with shifting “tastes” in imaginings of India and Ladakh, so, too, local activists and political leaders responded to the shifts in political and legal discourse and practice in India, such as the “Mandalization” of Indian politics. In the 1960s, when the unruly northeast was much in focus, the demand was for a form of administration modeled after the North East Frontier Agency; in the 1970s, the focus shifted to ST and Union Territory status; and finally, in the 1990s, a Hill Council was pursued, inspired by the Darjeeling example.

The “reality” of communalism as a dominant force in Indian and Kashmiri politics was “recognized” by Ladakhi leaders already in the 1930s, as we have seen. However, communal Muslim-Buddhist conflict has been the exception rather than the rule in Ladakh in the past decades. Certainly, at the time of partition, when Pakistani “raiders” advanced to Leh, there was deep mistrust, but the widespread violence known in other parts of the subcontinent has not been seen in Ladakh, in spite of three wars with Pakistan. Quite the contrary, memoranda, representations, and pamphlets voicing the demands of Ladakh’s leaders commonly are presented in all-Ladakh terms, accusing the state government of discriminatory policies against the region as a whole. A significant exception was the agitation that began in April 1969, when explicit communal rhetoric and indeed violence were used. However, even on this occasion it was soon evident that political fault lines in the region ran across religious community divisions, reflecting class, regional, and religious sectarian antagonisms *across* and *within* the two main “communities.” Within weeks of the start of the agitation, sections of the Buddhist establishment, led by Thikse monastery’s Khanpo Rinpoche, came out in open opposition against Bakula Rinpoche and his associates, whom they accused of inciting communal antagonism (van Beek 1996; Kaul and Kaul 1992). However, in view of the lack of response from state and central authorities to their demands for a greater share of development resources, Buddhist political leaders adapted to what they perceived to be the rules of the game of Indian politics and launched a communal agitation in 1989.

Some observers have suggested that the 1989 agitation, led by the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA), reflected a "natural" response of the Buddhist community to Muslim discrimination and encroachment in Leh district (Crook 1991, 1994; Emmer 1996). Although it appears that there has been no "unifying sense of a Ladakhi 'national' identity" (Bray 1991:118), neither should the rhetorical claims of LBA activists be accepted at face value. Dodin, for example, simply reproduces without comment their claim that the LBA "up to the present time represents the Ladakhi Buddhists in local politics" (1994:168–169). It is clear from the historical record that one of the most significant and enduring fault lines in Ladakhi politics runs across religious "community" lines, also dividing the Buddhist "community" between supporters and opponents of Kushok Bakula Rinpoche and his allies. This division was most clearly and violently expressed during the 1960s and early 1970s, a period in which two congress parties existed in Ladakh, known locally as Congress A and Congress B. The antagonisms split families and even the monasteries of Phyang and Thikse, where a group of monks left in protest against the Rinpoche's political stance (he was a prominent Congress B leader) and alleged erratic behavior. Known after their respective sizes, the breakaway faction and those who stayed behind were known as *curukpa* (the 16) and *gubcupa* (the 90), respectively, and there is an abundance of stories about their split. This period also saw the publication of the first Ladakhi political cartoons—albeit drawn by Kashmiri artist Bashir Ahmed Bashir—in a booklet filled with allegations against Bakula Rinpoche and his associates (Sonam Gonbo et al. 1972).

My experiences in Ladakh during 1989 and after, documents, and the personal testimonies of key players as well as a considerable number of "ordinary" people in Ladakh show that what agitators presented and observers often interpreted as a conflict between religious communities, a "clash of civilizations," escapes that simplistic frame. Not only "backstage" motivations but also actions, strategies, and interpretations—often only revealed after the Hill Council was granted—indicate that communalism was indeed (and not merely) a "language of contention" (Roseberry 1996)—a strategy adopted on the basis of a specific understanding of the requirements of Indian politics, in particular its purported communal nature. Once one refuses to accept the limited depth of field that identity fetishism offers, even "onstage" dimensions come into focus that were previously invisible, incomprehensible, or deemed insignificant.⁴³ These include not only the physical and psychological forces used to ensure compliance with the social boycott of Muslims, which was imposed by the LBA in 1989 and lasted for three years, but also the everyday forms of resistance of the common population against the disciplinary demands of the agitation leaders.⁴⁴ These ranged from refusal to participate in demonstrations and gossip and jokes about the leadership to violations of the ban on serving imported (that is, Indian) liquor at weddings and other festivities. It was common knowledge—or at least it was commonly assumed—that the leaders themselves were also violating many of the restrictions imposed on the Buddhist

population. At more than a few weddings, rum and whisky were flowing freely, usually in a separate room, hidden from the sight of most guests. Especially when outside of Ladakh, Muslims and Buddhists continued to socialize, and despite the rapid establishment, for example, of Buddhist butchers to provide meat to the carnivorous population of Leh, Muslim businesses survived rather easily. Especially in Leh and its surrounding villages, strict enforcement of LBA rules was difficult, for kinship ties frequently crossed religious community boundaries (Srinivas 1995, 1997), and as time passed, compliance with the boycott declined. When one considers all this, it becomes rather easier to understand the ease with which, in 1992, a joint platform of representatives of all “communities” could be formed to represent once again an all-Ladakh demand for regional autonomy, rather than a “Buddhist” one. The formation of this Coordination Committee, as it was known, was also a response to the central government’s firm stance that it would not negotiate autonomy for Ladakh on a communal platform. Of course, the government did insist on proper representation for each community on the committee: Buddhists, Muslims, and Christians.

Although the Scheduled Tribe classification process reflects the official discourse of recognition of diversity and development of “backward” classes of the Indian state, as enshrined in the constitution, and sheds light on the ways in which local populations interpret and engage such practices of identification, the communal agitations illustrate local understanding and use of the officially improper but politically effective religious community discourse.⁴⁵ The increasing prominence of communal rhetoric in Ladakhi politics is clearly, at times explicitly, linked with local understandings of Indian politics at the state and central level. This is evident also from the history of Buddhist political organization in the 1930s and around the time of partition, as we have seen. In this connection, the strengthening of the opposition in the 1967 Lok Sabha (parliamentary) elections and the rise of the communalist Jana Sangh and Swatantra Party may well have contributed to the choice of a communal strategy by some Ladakhi political leaders in 1969.⁴⁶ In Jammu, where resistance against domination by Kashmir also has continued unabated since independence, Hindu nationalist groups such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Praja Parishad have maintained a strong presence. In May 1969, the RSS newspaper *Organiser*, published from Delhi, covered the agitation in Ladakh, citing a memorandum by the Buddhist Action Committee of Leh listing allegations of Muslim aggression against the Buddhist population (Sonam Gonbo et al. 1972:39). In 1988–89 when the Congress was similarly under pressure from opposition parties, the LBA had regular and apparently warm contacts with the BJP and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. In the course of 1989–90, the escalation of armed struggle in Kashmir certainly strengthened Ladakhi (not only Buddhist) apprehensions. In the wake of the BJP coming to power in New Delhi and growing international tension over Kashmir, the LBA has decided once again to share a platform with radical organizations of Hindus from Jammu and the valley. Yet, although these broader political dimensions are

important, Ladakhi movements and politics should not be seen as mere epiphenomena, as derivatives of these processes beyond the region. Local projects, agency, and dynamics must be recognized. And regardless of changing strategies and political climate, the *demands* of successive agitators, political parties, and organizations such as the LBA have been straightforward: more resources and more influence on decision making. Regardless of shifting political discourse, these demands have never really changed; their justification has, but not their content. An identity-based approach would help little to explain the continuities and changes, nor can identity serve as the basis for a resolution of the causes that give rise to these demands.

After Autonomy

The "solution" to the Ladakhi demand, the granting of a regional autonomous development council in 1995, was justified in terms of Ladakh's unique identity (Government of India 1995; Krishna Rao 1995). This identity, however, remains largely unspecified in the act and the speeches of the officials: It is unique, setting it apart from the rest of the country. Because it remains unspecified, it is possible for all, including the governor of the state and the prime minister of India, to congratulate "the brave people of Ladakh" on their victory and to celebrate the government's loss of power. The generosity of the central government supports and illustrates its claim that the country is founded on respect for the nation's diversity; Ladakh can be held up as a reassuring example to minorities and would-be or actual secessionists elsewhere in the country.

This is, of course, not where the story ends. The causes that gave rise to the demand for regional autonomy and preferential treatment of the region are not addressed by a simple devolution and decentralization of power. Perceived regional imbalances, lack of access to employment, and slow implementation of "development" plans, coupled with the persistent erosion of relative local self-sufficiency, mean that the reorganization of part of the administration and planning process in the district of Leh does not necessarily or immediately lead to improvement in the lives of the disaffected. The assumption behind the autonomous council formula is, of course, that the council—comprising 26 members representing constituencies and four nominated members representing "principal minorities" and women—adequately reflects the population: It assumes and requires a significant congruence of space, community, and interest (Greenhouse and Greenwood 1998). These communities and interests, therefore, are supposed to be genuinely and sufficiently represented in the council, whose priorities and plans consequently will reflect those interests and will respond adequately and fairly to their demands.

Given the continued availability of the Kashmir government as a scapegoat, as well as the now even more widespread belief that "the system" is based on communalism, it is likely that communal tension will continue, as is already indicated by the split along communal lines in voting for the 1999 parliamentary elections. Continuing quarrels between some councillors and Sunni leaders indicate that among the political elite communalism has not been abandoned

entirely. The leadership of the LBA is unlikely to let the organization go back to purely social and religious welfare activities. The current president, former Member of the Legislative Assembly Tsering Samphel, has a strong record as a noncommunal campaigner for Ladakhi autonomy, but the Youth Wing continues to take a hard communalist line, as expressed in its campaign to expel (Shia) refugees from the fighting in Kargil in the spring of 1999. Communalism, while perhaps used strategically in 1989–93 by the agitation leadership to gain regional autonomy, has become part of the vocabulary and indeed the worldview of some of the new leaders, and it has left many traces in everyday discourse among the general population. Whereas the men behind the agitation are aware of the complexities of the history of Muslim-Buddhist relations in Ladakh and of the exaggerations and distortions of agitation propaganda on both sides, the younger and more radical elements do not have such an instrumental and historically informed view of identity and community. The younger generations take their communalism much more seriously, so to speak. There is a whole generation of young men in Leh who have grown up when the LBA, which led the agitation, had imposed a social boycott on the entire Muslim population of the district. Those young men have little knowledge of the history of the struggle for autonomy as a Ladakhi rather than a Buddhist struggle, and they see their world as overdetermined by communalism. Conversations with some of these young men confirm their communal perspective on their own lives as well as on the wider society and the Indian political system.

At the same time, there is no reason to expect that communalism *inevitably* will be the dominant form of articulation of difference and demands. Developments in Ladakh since the swearing in of the first Hill Council for Leh District—Kargil initially has declined the offer of an autonomous council—reflect a continuing fragmentation of political identifications. New and old divisions along class, regional, and age lines have rapidly gained importance. Young men who had risked their lives for the movement, often having spent time in jail and in hiding, have grown increasingly frustrated with the LBA. Already by the time the council was granted in 1995, the leadership was in danger of losing control over the most radical elements. In February 1995, an anonymous letter signed by “well-wishers of Ladakh” was delivered to prominent citizens of Leh, expressing severe doubts about the course of action chosen by the political leadership:⁴⁷

We have been very apprehensive of the intention of the Govt. of India from the moment when our leaders were gullibled to scale down their demand from U.T. The leaders of the Coordination Committee/LBA are still begging with the Central Govt. for merely an Autonomous Hill Council without realising that they are being duped and taken for a ride. Therefore it is high time now that they seriously consider to change the present line of action which has led us nowhere.

The letter goes on to argue that Ladakhis should “consider the offer of the Kashmiri leaders to jointly fight for independent Kashmir, provided they promise and ensure us to have our own way in the event of Kashmir gaining

independence.” Students demonstrating in Leh in March threatened that volunteers had come forward who would immolate themselves unless the Hill Council act was passed immediately. A high-level government delegation from New Delhi visited Leh on April 14, 1995, and promised that the Hill Council would be granted within a month. In response, the Coordination Committee scaled back the agitation. During a massive demonstration the next day, in which a wide cross section of political and religious leaders participated, violence was threatened if no announcement were made before May 15. An extensive bombing campaign of government buildings in Leh, said to have been planned by a group of radical young activists, was thus averted.⁴⁸

It was among these radical elements, the “real fighters” as they sometimes refer to themselves, that suspicions about the continued dominance of the old elite were voiced most explicitly. The domination of the council by members of the aristocracy is something that particularly offends some young activists. They felt and feel manipulated: “Do you know what I have done in the agitation, *acho-le* [older brother]? These guys, they do nothing for us now!” This complaint illustrates one important aspect of Ladakh’s modern political history that has commonly been ignored or underplayed by analysts: the struggle against *skudragism*, as one LBA activist called the dominance by the old elite. *Skudrag*, literally, “noble body,” is the local designation for people of noble birth. The term covers the “classes” (*rigs*) of royals (*gyalrigs*) and other nobles (*rigs dan*). The vast majority of households are classified as commoners (*man-grigs*), whereas small socially stigmatized “communities” of blacksmiths (*garra*) and musicians (*mon* and *beda*) form the “inferior” class (*rigs ngan*). Restrictions of varying severity apply to interaction with members of the latter groups, although their discrimination is officially and publicly decried or denied altogether (Brauen 1980; Dollfus 1989:33–47; Erdmann 1983). Campaigns to combat their stigmatization—most demonstratively by the Dalai Lama’s beating a drum and sharing a meal in the house of one blacksmith family in Leh—have had important but limited effect.

As these instances suggest, other forms of identification than religious community appear to be (re)gaining importance. There have been growing tensions between Leh and “backward” areas, such as Changthang and Rupshu, but there are also relatively new organizations of “houseless people,” of unemployed youths, and of *lagshespa* (skilled craftspeople), the euphemism said to have been proposed by the Dalai Lama.⁴⁹ Soon after the swearing in of the first council, members representing Changthang constituencies were reported to have expressed criticisms of some members of the executive council. The representatives from Changthang quickly denied ever having spoken with a journalist, and a front of unity was restored. As a matter of fact, however, the report was accurate, and eventually it was one of these councillors who broke with the congress, joined the National Conference (NC), and played an important part in the campaign for the Lok Sabha elections in 1998, which led to the defeat of the congress incumbent of the Ladakh seat, former Union Minister P. Namgyal (van Beek 1999).

It could be argued that the victory in 1998 of the NC candidate, Syed Aga Hussein, a Shia spiritual leader from Kargil (Grist 1998), illustrates the relative weakness of communalist idioms and practices. The support for the NC candidate by considerable numbers of Buddhist voters in Leh District can be attributed in part to general disillusionment, especially among the youth and marginal population, with the lack of performance of the Hill Council and in part to the skillful enlisting by Kashmir Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah of two ambitious Buddhist religious leaders—Khanpo Rinpoche of Thikse and Togdan Rinpoche of Phyang. The near-absence of communalist rhetoric in the 1998 election campaign was striking, but the subsequent elections of September 1999 indicate that communalism remains a force to be reckoned with. In the face of its loss in 1998 and the reluctance of the aging P. Namgyal to run again, the Congress Party fielded Thupstan Chhewang as its candidate for the Lok Sabha seat. Because he embodies the pinnacle of just about every Buddhist Ladakhi hierarchy, religious as well as secular—he comes from the prominent Shey Lhonpo family, is a nephew of Kushok Bakula, is married to the daughter of the queen of Ladakh, and is a recognized reincarnate lama (*tulku*)—the Congress Party could be confident that it would draw a considerable number of votes in Leh District and probably in the Buddhist Zangskar region of Kargil District. However, as leader of the LBA during the agitation of 1989, Thupstan Chhewang for many Muslims personifies Buddhist communalism. Realizing the difficulty of campaigning openly against him, the Buddhist Ladakhi ministers of state in Farooq Abdullah's government, Togdan Rinpoche and Tsetan Namgyal, and the newly appointed NC member of the Rajya Sabha (the upper house of India's parliament), Khanpo Rinpoche, were said to have approached the Congress Party with a proposal to resign collectively from their posts and quit the National Conference Party. In return, the Leh District Congress Party should disband itself, Thupstan Chhewang should withdraw his candidacy, and a regional party should be formed to contest the elections with a "consensus candidate." The Congress Party leadership in Leh declined the offer, although there appears to have been no consensus on this course of action.

Despite fierce campaigning, the Congress Party was unable to regain the Ladakh seat, and Thupstan Chhewang lost to NC candidate Hassan Khan from Kargil, albeit by a mere 2,000 votes. According to news reports, turnout in Ladakh was low compared with that of previous years, with 68 percent polling in Leh town and 73 percent in Kargil town, and votes were split along communal lines. In Leh, Thupstan Chhewang polled 31,220 votes but received only 7,625 votes in Shia-dominated Kargil. Ghulam Hassan Khan received 41,669 votes in Kargil but only 7,525 in Buddhist-dominated Leh District. Yet, despite this apparent split along religious community lines, things are considerably more complex not only on the Buddhist side, where NC, Congress, and other Buddhist candidates vied for support, but also among the Muslim population, in Leh as well as Kargil (Grist 1998:191 ff.).

Despite the victories of the NC, there are clear indications that the failure of Member of Parliament Aga Hussein and the three ministers of state (Kushog

Togdan and Tsetan Namgyal from Leh District and Qamar Ali from Kargil) from the region to deliver on campaign promises is leading to growing resentment against the Kashmir government among local leaders and the general population. The relationship between LAHDC and the chief minister continues to be characterized by mutual animosity and deep mistrust. In the winter of 1998–99 tension escalated and led to a general strike. It appears that a new broad coalition is forming in Ladakh for secession from Kashmir and direct rule from New Delhi through the granting of Union Territory status. Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah’s initiatives toward a redefinition of the state’s ties with the central government and between the state and its constituent regions have been greeted with severe criticism from many sides. The BJP rejects greater autonomy for the state for reasons of “national integrity”; secessionist leaders see it falling short of full independence; whereas political forces at the regional level in Jammu and Ladakh see a danger of even greater subjection to discrimination by Srinagar. With respect to the internal reorganization of the state, a recent proposal to divide the Ladakh region into three parts with separate autonomous councils for Kargil, Leh, and Nubra is decried by Ladakhi leaders as a communalist-inspired attempt to break up the region.

From the perspective of many Ladakhi leaders, direct rule from Delhi once again seems the only viable way of protecting Ladakhi interests. In public statements, a clear effort has been made to present the incipient movement as representing all parties and “communities,” as illustrated by the joint participation of the presidents of the LBA and the Anjuman-e Imamia at a public rally in March 1999. LAHDC representatives held meetings with the union home minister in February 1999, reiterating the demand for Union Territory status, and members of the Youth Wing of the LBA met with the prime minister in November. In February 2000, the LBA joined Hindu organizations of Jammu and Panun Kashmir representing the pandits in demanding that the state be split into four parts: Jammu, Ladakh, and a separate region each for the Hindus and Muslims of the Kashmir Valley. Once again, there appears to be a convergence of interests between the Buddhists of Ladakh and communal organizations more or less closely tied to the ruling BJP. Once more, the LBA and local political organizations are preparing for a struggle to get attention for their demands, which still revolve around the allocation of resources, jobs, and political power but which once again may need to be fought in the language of identity politics.

Communities, Democracy, and Justice

In a world in which imagined order is treated as essential, even natural, order and is made the basis for the “proper” management of the social, of resource allocation and access, of citizenship and representation, it is clear that if that order does not exist in that particular form (of peoples, nations, communities, identities), tensions over (perceived) unequal access to resources not only cannot be addressed but also in fact are exacerbated through the institutionalization and empowerment of difference/identity. As Greenwood writes, “Elaborate

political attempts to pin down cultural identities as transhistorical absolutes . . . cannot succeed because of the very character of the phenomenon in question” (1993:3). The very principle that is supposed to provide peace and justice—self-determination, representation, and participation on the basis of assumed groupness—in fact produces collective violence and inequality, indeed practically justifies “ethnic” conflict. If the states system, representative democracy, and conceptions of justice and development rely on the identification and representation of communities, but no such stable community exists, the crisis is not resolvable simply by devolving power to low-level collectivities. How does one measure “proper” representation, judge claims to a voice, consider justice, if the very groups in which these are supposed to be located do not have the stability, unambiguity, and boundedness that the system of representation requires?

As Touraine points out, following Marshall, “An awareness of being a citizen is the only thing that can re-establish the unity of society, which has been shattered by conflicts between social classes which are very distant from one another” (Touraine 1995:330). Indeed, as Marshall (1983) reminds us, (individual) civil rights preceded the granting of political citizenship and its associated social rights, which—importantly—came to signify the status of full membership in the (national) community. Marshall also points to the importance of education in the creation of “this growing national consciousness, this awakening public opinion, and these first stirrings of a sense of community membership and common heritage” (1983:255). In the case of Ladakh, we can trace the same development and, indeed, can discern the very conscious “education” of Ladakh’s population.⁵⁰ Ladakhis were told—by politicians, teachers, activists, documents, and so forth—that they were equal citizens; yet many found or came to perceive themselves as victims of discrimination. The failure of the Indian state to deliver on its promises (Brass 1998:500) is blamed squarely—though not by all—on domination by Kashmir. Ladakh, it is argued, needs to be freed from Kashmir, just as India needed to be liberated from British colonial rule. In the preindependence era, the British were seen as potential allies by Ladakhis, and hopes for independence have been pinned on the central government, which has intervened repeatedly on the region’s behalf—however halfheartedly or ineffectively when seen from a Ladakhi perspective. Yet this continuing identification with the national (development) project of *India* and the central government cannot be taken for granted. Touraine writes of the growing underclass in Europe, “Once, they were exploited. They are now becoming outsiders, and it is no accident that they often redefine themselves in ethnic or cultural terms rather than social or economic [ones]” (1995:335). In Ladakh, dissatisfaction with the kind of change that has taken place in the region has increasingly articulated with communalist discourse now threatening to become dominant in the redefinition of India’s national project in line with the Hindutva agenda. This development, too, has been no accident, as I have sought to show.

In a forceful critique of the “secularism” of the Indian state, Ashis Nandy argues for the importance of “accessible political idioms” and insists that “at the ground level, where survival is at stake, the traditional codes of tolerance are the ones that matter” (1997:168).⁵¹ Leaving aside the problematically presumed tolerance of traditional codes, the question is whether in the field of politics in contemporary India space exists for noncommunal codes of tolerance or, rather, whether such space may be discernible for those living at the margins of the nation-state. Although citizenship and the discourse of democracy and rights suggest one society of free and formally equal individuals, the “real conditions of people’s lives” are leading to a (perceived) widening of the gap between social groups. Disparities in wealth, opportunity, and empowerment in Ladakh are not new, but they are no longer legitimized through “traditional” systems of justification such as status groups that “fixed” people’s status. The point is not that such disparities and hierarchies were uncontested or ineluctable but, rather, that in a modern nation-state context they are *formally* contestable; indeed, they violate the “contract” between the nation and its citizenry. In other words, democracy suggests formal equality that under capitalism cannot but lead to contradictions and conflict. The national project (as formulated in the constitution and political programs) and the rights of citizenship do not resolve these contradiction; rather, they make them into contradictions in the first place *and* offer a framework of shared language, rules, and practices to contest them. The problem, from the perspective of many Ladakhis, is that practice demands a communal formulation of interests and representation. And with demands (finally) and public expressions of identification falling in line with the perceived rules of the game, institutionalization and empowerment of the new identity-based “community” appear as a logical and just solution. As I have argued here, however, such a solution fails to take into account both the causes of dissatisfaction and the complexity and irreducibility of social identification in Ladakh. Such a solution merely reproduces identity fetishism, reinforcing or creating exclusivist antagonisms, fragmenting local coalitions, and setting the stage for more violence. The question that remains is whether alternatives are at all conceivable.

Explorations beyond Identity Fetishism

Much of the debate on multiculturalism in the public sphere, as well as in academia, is premised on a “primitivist construction of cultural others along semi-anthropological lines” (Cheah 1998:290). Calls for regional autonomy, such as those emanating from Ladakh, are easily embraced as voices of undifferentiated, authentic communities, regarded as victims both of colonialism (in the case of Ladakh, be it British, Dogra, or Kashmiri colonialism) and of the developmentalist interventions of ill-informed bureaucrats and politicians, whether well meaning or not. My purpose here has not been to dispute the dislocations caused by the deepening and spreading of capitalism and the incorporation of Ladakh in processes of state formation in the subcontinent. It certainly has not been my intention to argue against greater, more genuine

involvement of the local population in decision making. Many of the specific complaints that have been voiced in the course of the past decades by different spokespersons can quite readily be substantiated. The failure rates on matriculation exams, for example, an obvious source of great frustration throughout the region, *are* well over 90 percent; un- and underemployment are high; corruption is rampant; and discrimination is experienced by many Ladakhis in encounters with the Kashmiri bureaucracy and government. There *is*, no doubt, a deep and growing sense of frustration over the profound changes in local lives, over the promises but slow delivery of “development”: proper facilities, money, scooters and cars, color televisions. But such problems and demands are not problems of “identity,” resolvable through recognition of a particular, normative notion of groupness. Moreover, neither in the sphere of formal politics, among the elite, nor in the broader sphere of social interaction can any such singular, relatively stable, and unambiguously bounded Ladakhi or Buddhist identity be found. This is not to argue that people in Ladakh lack a sense of collective belonging; regional, village, kinship, and religious identifications are indeed salient and often fundamental (I use the term purposely) to social practice. But this *is* to argue against a facile “recognition,” on the basis of a simplistic understanding of cultural identity—which I see as a cause and consequence of identity fetishism—of communal or other such singular identities as the only, or privileged, basis of political representation and empowerment. This, as Roberto Alejandro writes in a critique of Iris Marion Young (1990), would imply that “individuals ought to live up to the standards of their group; they need to accept the *universality* of their group’s culture in order to preserve the *difference* of that group vis-à-vis other groups” (Alejandro 1993:127). Young’s solution would in fact strengthen that same universal code of particularity whose oppressive nature she set out to critique.⁵² Alejandro points out that “it is certainly odd to defend the principle of difference, so to speak, and ‘fix’ it insofar as the individual is concerned” (1993:127). Grounding his approach in Gadamer’s hermeneutics, he suggests that political judgment, then, “may imply not the pursuit of a collective life, but the definition of principles aimed at preserving the individual’s distance from that collective life. Furthermore, it admits the possibility that there are neither common traditions nor common meanings nor common ideals among those deliberating in the public realm” (1993:225). Such a plurality of positionings may make understanding and agreement difficult but not impossible, and it makes participation rather than representation the fundamental principle of democracy, without assuming or imposing one particular interpretation of “community” or “identity.” This suggests the reconstitution of the political “as a dimension where communality may turn out to be episodic and where distance may be the only option available, but where both . . . are always possibilities worth exploring” (Alejandro 1993:226). No easy solution offers itself, but critical engagements with these questions are necessary for overcoming the fetishism of identities.⁵³

The paradox that I have sought to elucidate here remains unresolved: Although the politics of identity is a symptom and cause of conflict, in political

systems based on representation it is also the only viable strategy open to those who seek to make claims on institutions of formal power. I have argued that these phenomena must be understood as outcomes of broader political economic processes—frequently and easily glossed as globalization—but that they are not fully determined by them. The forms of specific cases, such as the one in Ladakh, draw on local practices and idioms of identification, but the meanings of those “identities” are radically altered in the process. The communalization of politics in Ladakh significantly affects social and political identification in the region, at times violently turning neighbors against each other. However, such singular logics of exclusivist identification never fully constitute and determine the social, but only precariously, contestedly, and temporarily. This instability of identity-based exclusivism is not a consequence of an innate code of tolerance, grounded in a strong sense of collective self, but, rather, of the very substance of culture: the ongoing negotiation of an irreducible tension between a singular imagined order and the lived experience of the impossibility of such a singular order. To challenge exclusivist identity-based political strategies and purported resolutions to “ethnic” or communal conflict is not, therefore, to privilege a particular form of scholarly metadiscursive practice (cf. Briggs 1996) but, rather, to defend everyday practices of social identification against official and scholarly imaginings of irreducible difference and identity.

Ladakhi politicians demanding regional autonomy may be seeking something that in the bigger scheme of things is increasingly irrelevant. The nation-state, at least in its welfarist/developmentalist form, appears to be in decline also in India. As illustrated by the adoption of policies of liberalization, the capacity and willingness of the state to mediate between market and society and among sections of the population to promote social justice are increasingly limited. Given how people, for example, in Ladakh, recognize their “real conditions,” and given the hegemony of the universal code of particularity rooted in identity fetishism, it may be difficult—for them, for us—to see any viable alternative to identitarian politics of exclusion. At the same time, the idea that autonomy on the basis of identity produces not only peace and stability but also justice rests on a dangerously narrow conception, indeed, a misrecognition, of human sociality and identification.

Notes

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1. Ladakhi words are rendered in an approximation of local pronunciation, rather than transliterated according to Ladakhi/Tibetan orthography, so that this article may be more accessible to nonspecialists. Specialists will know the correct forms—although Ladakhi, which differs considerably from written and spoken Tibetan, poses challenges in this respect because it has no standard written form. Personal names follow the practice of the individuals concerned, as far as I am familiar with it, and may correspond neither to Ladakhi/Tibetan orthography nor to common pronunciation (for example, *Thupstan Chhewang* for "Thub.bstan tshe.dbang"). I refer to the people of Ladakh as Ladakhis, rather than as Ladagspa, because this is the way they most commonly refer to themselves in English.

2. Reliable recent population figures are unavailable, for the first regular census since 1981 is only to be carried out this year. The population of Leh District is estimated to have been 89,474 in 1991, more than double the number given in the 1961 census (Government of Jammu and Kashmir 1997:1). Given a decennial growth rate of 31.78 percent for 1971–81 (Government of Jammu and Kashmir 1997:2), it is likely that the population of the region, including Kargil District, is well in excess of 200,000.

3. The formation of the state and the ongoing dispute over its status are beyond the scope of this essay. On Ladakh's incorporation, see Datta 1973, Huttenback 1961, and Petech 1977. The literature on Kashmir is vast and disparate. Recent contributions include Bose 1997, 1999; Ganguly 1999; Lamb 1992; Rahman 1996; Rao 1999; and the collection edited by Thomas (1992). The question of the disputed frontier in Ladakh is discussed in detail by Mehra (1992), whereas Lamb (1964), Woodman (1969), and Greenhut (1982) offer a broader treatment of Himalayan border disputes.

4. The question of sizes and growth rates of the respective "communities" has been a controversial issue. Regarding Muslims in Ladakh, see Dollfus 1995; Grist 1995, 1998; Pinault 1999; Sheikh 1995; and Srinivas 1995, 1997, 1998.

5. Examples of such reductionist readings of the conflict include Crook 1994, 1991; and Emmer 1996. Crook (1999) offers a more nuanced perspective.

6. An autonomous council was also considered for the mountainous Uttarakhand region of Uttar Pradesh. Political developments appear to have made outright statehood the more likely outcome of that struggle, although nothing has been decided at the time of this writing.

7. Lapidoth writes that "surprisingly, there is no generally accepted definition for the concept of either a minority or a member of a minority" (1997:11). From a legal perspective, such a lack of clarity may be surprising but not if one approaches identity and community sociologically and anthropologically.

8. It should be clear that identity fetishism is not merely "like" commodity fetishism but, rather, part of the process in which "modes of reification involved in commodity fetishism radiate from the realm of the production of things to the production of social identities" (Coronil 1996:77). For a useful discussion of theoretical approaches to fetishism, see Pietz 1993.

9. The idea that the "fragmentation" or "multiplicity" of "identities" is a consequence of modernity, as is commonly argued, rests itself on an assumption about the unity or relative stability of "pre/nonmodern" identities. My point is that this entire notion of "identity" relies on an untenable evolutionist imagining of "traditional communities" that fails to recognize the complexity and fluidity of social relations and identifications that constitute the social, also in such "traditional communities." In this connection, although I find much to agree with in Laclau's discussions of representation and democracy, I find that his analysis is weakened by his continuing reliance on conceptions of "basic" identity, despite his assertion, following Lacan, that "the field of social identities is not one of full identities, but of their ultimate failure to be constituted" (Laclau 1990:38). This is particularly evident in Laclau's contrast between representation as merely "supplemental" to the constitution of identities and its becoming a "primary" terrain of the same as "social agents are becoming more and more 'multiple selves,' with loosely integrated and unstable identities" (1996a:99). The formal, analytical point he is making here is useful and important, but the implicit notion that this is somehow new reflects a lack of sensitivity to the creativity and complexity of social identification in "nonmodern" contexts. This in turn can be traced, I believe, to his underdeveloped treatment of "groupness," which is most clearly revealed in his (sparse) references to concrete cases, mostly through others' texts (e.g., Laclau 1996b:53–54), and in the way in which the notion of coalitions between social movements relies on singular identifications of each movements' "members" (see especially Laclau and Mouffe 1985: ch. 4). What is missing is a rigorous discussion of the mode of existence of groups in social practice, that is, through material social relations and identifications.

10. The literalization of "identity" metaphors is a necessary step on the path toward the violence of "ethnic" conflict. Although I emphasize here the family resemblances and shared principles of identity fetishism, the specificities of different kinds of rhetoric and practices of exclusion, such as racism, nationalism, ethnicity, and religion, should be recognized in concrete analyses.

11. On religious nationalism and the rise of the BJP, see Hansen 1999, Jaffrelot 1996, Kaviraj 1997, and van der Veer 1994. On secularism, see Brass 1998; Chatterjee 1995; Madan 1987; Nandy 1990, 1997; and Vanaik 1997. On communalism and violence, see Das 1995, 1998; and Tambiah 1996.

12. In this, I concur with recent arguments for the importance of anthropological engagement with questions of democracy, multiculturalism, and justice (Abélès 1997; Greenhouse 1998; Herzfeld 1997).

13. Michael Mann, for example, drawing on arguments put forward by Robert Wade, points to the continued importance of production for domestic markets and the fact that "multinational corporations" are still predominantly owned and based in their home-based countries. In addition, although global trade has indeed increased, "most trade and cross-ownership occurs between long-standing allies" (Mann 1995:117). On the continued/declining importance of the nation-state, see also Sassen 1996 and Held 1995. For me, the issue is not so much whether or not the nation-state as a form/institution is declining but, rather, what the implications of global (and hence national) restructuring of economic and political relations are for what Jessop (1990) calls "state projects."

14. Similar arguments regarding the mutual implications of science and bureaucratic operations have been put forward by many, including Anderson (1991, 1998); Foucault (1980, 1991); Hacking (1990); Herzfeld (1992, 1996); and, in the South Asian context, Appadurai (1993), Cohn (1991), Inden (1990), Pandey (1990), and Pedersen (1986). See also Gregory's (1994) useful genealogy of "the world as exhibition."

15. As Herzfeld observes, "Bureaucrats work on the categories of social existence much the same way as sorcerers are supposed to work on the hair or nail clippings of their intended victims" (1992:62). The affinities between the workings of the modern state and magic are also creatively discussed by Taussig (1997).

16. "Almost" because they are and can be contested, and such contestations lead to a reconfiguration or other type of adjustment of the categories, rankings, and classes. But the appeal to natural, rational order disallows a contestation of the grammar as such, for such a challenge would be a challenge to rationality and nature itself, which together form the most powerful referents for justification and legitimation.

17. For this reason, the primordialist-constructivist dichotomy is rather beside the point. I am sympathetic to Comaroff's recent critique of constructivist approaches as being generally guilty of "neo-primordialism" (1996) and agree with Taussig that "construction deserves more respect" (1993:xvi).

18. The notion of "grandeur," perhaps best translated here as "weight," I borrow from Boltanski and Thévenot's (1991) useful discussion of *mondes de justification* (worlds of justification).

19. As O'Hanlon puts it in her critique of subaltern studies,

At the very moment of this assault upon western historicism, the classic figure of western humanism—the self-originating, self-determining individual, who is at once a subject in his possession of a sovereign consciousness whose defining quality is reason, and an agent in his power of freedom—is readmitted through the back door in the figure of the subaltern himself, as he is restored to history in the reconstruction of the Subaltern project. [1988:191]

See also Inden's (1996) review of Chatterjee's book.

20. Ladakh fails to fall neatly within the scope of one of the established regional fields of study—it is indeed located at the "crossroads of high Asia" (Rizvi 1996)—and was closed to researchers, including Indian citizens, between 1947 and 1974. John Bray (1998) offers a review of the state of contemporary research on the region.

21. Examples of early ethnographic texts include Cunningham 1973, Drew 1976, Ramsay 1890, and Singh 1912. For a detailed analysis of the census attempts at unambiguous classification of Ladakh's population, see van Beek 1997a.

22. Ladakhi historian Abdul Ghani Sheikh (1997) and Joldan (1985a) offer discussions of some renowned Ladakhi travelers, often in the service of foreign explorers. The autobiography of one such traveler, Ghulam Rassul Galwan, was published in England as *Servant of Sahibs* (1923). See van Beek 1998 for a discussion.

23. See also Rao 1999. The requirement of official sanction for the establishment of such organizations was a general one and was not limited to Muslim organizations, as Rahman (1996:38) suggests.

24. The Jammu and Kashmir case suggests that Kooiman overgeneralizes the distinction between "Princely" and "British" India when he writes that "the paramount power refrained from imposing [separate electorates] on Indian India" (1995:2125). In official British terms, incidentally, Kashmir—although a princely state—was considered part of what was called British India. I thank John Bray for this reminder.

25. He later went to England where he obtained an engineering degree. After independence, he had an illustrious career: he became chief engineer of the State of Jammu

and Kashmir, entered politics, and ended his career as Indian ambassador to Mongolia. On the KRBMS and the role of Kashmiri pandits in the formation of the YMBA, see Bertelsen 1997. See also Bray 1991, Ganhar and Ganhar 1956, Kaul and Kaul 1992, and Shaksपो 1988.

26. The “minutebook” of the YMBA, a manuscript in Urdu, contains notes of meetings of the YMBA from its foundation in 1938 until 1954. Although it contains important historical information, it was written to comply with the official requirements of the state government, which received copies of the notes. Terms agreed on with the person who currently possesses the minutebook prevent me from quoting from it directly.

27. See Government of Jammu and Kashmir 1958. Of course, the laws did not end the practice of polyandry, which is reported to be still quite common, for example, in Zangskar (Gutschow 1998; Riaboff 1997).

28. There is a growing literature on this mythology and on Orientalism in Tibetan scholarship in general. See Bishop 1989, Lopez 1998, Korom 1997, Masuzawa 1999, and the collection *Mythos Tibet* (Dodin and R  ther 1997). On “Green” visions of Tibet, see Huber 1997 and Pedersen 1995. The paradigmatic case of ecological romanticist description of Ladakh is Norberg-Hodge 1991. The purported direct links between Buddhism and ecological soundness, although they serve to strengthen local demands for protective measures, also exacerbate the exclusion of Muslims from “wholesome” Ladakhi culture and society. On anti-Muslim prejudice in scholarship on Ladakh, see Aggarwal 1997 and Grist 1998:40–47.

29. Bakula Rinpoche’s appointment as district president of the National Conference during a visit by Nehru in July 1947, referred to as a “coup” by some locals, displaced the Kalon family of Leh and the monastery of Hemis from their position of dominance (van Beek 1996). Hemis belongs to the Drukpa Kargyud sect and is historically the most powerful and wealthiest of Ladakh’s monasteries. The rise of Kushok Bakula Rinpoche and his Spituk monastery, belonging to the Gelug sect, also signaled the eclipse of Thikse monastery as the principal Gelug establishment in the region.

30. Memorandum submitted by the All Gonpa Association of Ladakh through Their Representatives to the Hon’ble Chief Minister, Jammu & Kashmir. Dated Jammu, March 13, 1972.

31. Thikse monastery owns a little over 1,300 acres, reflecting its past position.

32. The conversion of Ladakhi and Tibetan measures is fraught with difficulty. A khal is really a measure of volume and may be equivalent to between 5 and 75 kilograms. In this case, I have assumed the reference is to *serbo khal*, which is frequently used in connection with loans. The etymology of *serbo* is unclear but may be derived from the Urdu *seer* (one pound). See Osmaston and Tashi Rabgias 1994:125–126.

33. I thank Phuntsog Tsering for his assistance in translating this letter, dated “eighth day of the seventh month of the Earth-Rabbit year” (1879), which is kept at the Jammu and Kashmir State Archives Repository, Jammu (Persian records, file no. 1157). Johnson’s attempts at tax reform and local responses are discussed in the Chronicles of Ladakh. See the translation by Francke (1992:142–143) or the *La.dwags rgyal.rabs* (1987:94–96). Riaboff (1997:228 ff.) offers a good review of the history of taxation in Zangskar and Ladakh.

34. Unlike the case in many other places in the subcontinent, the British were commonly seen by Ladakhis as potential allies and protectors against the Dogras and Kashmiris. Already Moorcroft, who was in Ladakh just prior to the Dogra invasion of 1834, was asked to help get support from the British. S  kefeld (1997) reports a similar positive attitude toward the British in Gilgit, whereas MacDonald (1998) shows that the opposite

was the case in Baltistan. In Leh and Kargil, the British had a reputation for paying the stipulated fees for begar service, although the institution as such was resented.

35. For discussions of the trade, see Grist 1985, 1994; Joldan 1985b; Rizvi 1994, 1997, 1999; Sheikh 1999; and Warikoo 1985, 1990, 1995. For an early critical account of the impact on Ladakh of tourism and modernity in general, see Gompertz 1928.

36. The attack on Sheikh Abdullah's government caused a furor. It was widely covered in the Indian press, for example, Darem 1952 and *Times of India* 1952a, 1952b, 1952c. I thank Javed Mir Qasim and the late Sonam Stobdan Lachumir for help with the translation of an Urdu manuscript version of the speech. In 1952, Lachumir was private secretary and interpreter to Bakula Rinpoche. Shridhar Kaul, one of the driving forces behind the communal mobilization of Ladakh's Buddhist elite, authored the speech, according to his son, H. N. Kaul (Kaul and Kaul 1992:194–199).

37. Research in Ladakh's Changthang has begun only recently, after the lifting of restrictions on travel in this sensitive border region. Monisha Ahmed's recent dissertation (1996) is the first anthropological study of Rupshu based on long-term field research.

38. In the summer of 1999, despite efforts at mediation by the LBA and others, the khangu persisted in their refusal to accept these traditional obligations. The problem is itself partly a consequence of the fragmentation of households that has led to a proliferation of nuclear families and a drain of labor power from the khangpa. For more detail on the khangpa/khangu (sometimes called *khang chen* and *khang chung*, literally, "big house" and "small house") relationship and household organization in Ladakh, see Aggarwal 1994, Dollfus 1989, Grist 1990, Gutschow 1998, and Phylactou 1989.

39. See Dollfus 1989 and Srinivas 1998 for more detail on labor-sharing practices.

40. Perceived incompetence and lack of initiative from the LAHDC led to the first-time capture of the Ladakh parliamentary seat by the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference of Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah in June 1998. For an account of the predicaments of the Hill Council, see van Beek 1999.

41. Upon the Gajendragadkar Commission's recommendation, in 1968 such a reservation for permanent residents of Ladakh District had been created, albeit of only 2 percent of government jobs (Government of Jammu and Kashmir 1968:135).

42. In its recommendations, the Gajendragadkar Commission suggested an upper limit of reservations in jobs and education of 50 percent. In 1979, when the Mandal Commission was formed, many states already had legislation in place that provided considerable levels of reservations. In other words, the Mandal Commission's suggestions were modest and would have a rather marginal impact (Hansen 1999:140–145).

43. My use of the terms *backstage* and *onstage* should not be understood to suggest a sharp distinction between the two. Rather, I am making an analytical distinction between official, public statements and acts and less advertised or even secret acts, often by the same actors. Nor am I suggesting that the backstage behavior is somehow more "authentic" or "true" than the onstage acts. The contradictions and tensions between the two that an observer might expect do not necessarily arise at all for the person participating in the art of representation.

44. My reading is informed by Scott's discussions (1985, 1990). On the social boycott as a weapon in conflicts in Ladakh, see Aggarwal 1994: ch. 1. New in 1989 was the application of this method to an entire religious "community." Disciplinary measures included fines, beatings, intimidation, and a network of informers. Enforcement was primarily a responsibility of the Youth Wing of the LBA.

45. Note that its political effectiveness derives from its dominance in Indian politics, rather than its supposed reflection of communal "identity." Its salience in Indian

politics, of course, is also not to be misunderstood as merely reflecting a communalist essence of Indian society or even political practice.

46. See Jaffrelot 1996 and Hansen 1999 for a discussion of the rise of the Jana Sangh and RSS during this period.

47. The letter is not dated and is signed with “some well-wishers of Ladakh.” I was not in Leh at the end of February, when the letter was sent out, but returned there on March 17. One of my contacts provided me with a copy of the letter in early April 1995, when there were almost daily demonstrations and the threat of violent escalation was at its height.

48. Bomb blasts have mostly been used to get attention and put pressure on the administration. Bombings in Leh have, as far as I am aware, never claimed lives, and damage to property has generally been limited. The perpetrators used sticks of dynamite obtained from the many construction projects around Ladakh.

49. It is worth noting that in many if not all of these organizations Bakula Rinpoche’s former associate, Sonam Wangyal, had some form of involvement until his death in 1998. Sonam Wangyal always presented himself and was by many regarded as a champion of the cause of the oppressed sections of Ladakhi society. His own views on his career can be found in Sonam Wangyal 1997.

50. On his first visit to Leh in July 1949, Nehru reportedly told a crowd of Ladakhis that “unless you learn and train yourselves, you cannot run the affairs of your country” (*Amrita Bazaar Patrika* 1949).

51. Critics such as Vanaik (1997) and Brass (1998) have argued that Nandy’s attack on secularism, like Madan’s (1997), is flawed in several respects, including his reading of secularism as antireligious. The debate is beyond the scope of the present discussion, but I am overall in agreement with these two critics that secularism, understood as neutrality and tolerance with respect to different religions, is a necessary foundation for a democratic polity.

52. This is not to deny the importance of Young’s book, especially her critique of the distributive paradigm of justice. Young herself is aware of the problem of intragroup oppression and suppression of difference. However, her discussion (especially 1990: ch. 8) of what she calls the “myth of community” fails sufficiently to consider the inherent contradictions between this “myth” and the kind of celebration of group affinity that she regards as a possible move toward justice.

53. There is a rapidly growing body of literature that addresses these issues, such as Connolly 1991; Laclau 1996a; Taylor 1992; Touraine 1995, 1997; and Tully 1995. Many central problems are discussed in stimulating ways in the volume edited by Cheah and Robbins (1998).

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